Adapting to the Rhythm of Shiftwork

Shiftwork and shiftworkers are necessary and instrumental in keeping so many vital operations going 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This could mean working nights or alternating days, nights and afternoons, or other irregular shifts.

Twenty-five percent of workers in North America are shiftworkers. Shiftwork has been associated with health and safety risks, both in and out of work.

What's the Danger?

The Institute for Work and Health reports there is strong evidence that shiftwork is associated with an increased risk of occupational injury due to:

- Worker fatigue
- Less supervision; and
- Less co-worker support.

In fact, the risk of an incident was found to be 20 percent greater during the first to second hours of a night shift. A smaller increase in incident likelihood was found to exist between 3 a.m. and 4 a.m.

Shiftwork and the disruptions in sleep it causes have also been shown to create changes in appetite, along with gastrointestinal and digestive issues. Shiftwork can aggravate existing medical conditions and interfere with how some medications work.

Aside from the physical concerns, shiftworkers also face emotional challenges. Shiftwork affects how much time a worker spends with family and friends. It can also make it challenging to participate in clubs, sports and other social activities that are designed for a normal 9-5 schedule. This can lead to relationship problems, depression and feelings of isolation.

How to Protect Yourself

Employees can reduce the risk of heat stress by remembering three things.

1. Get plenty of sleep.
    - Sleep in a dark and cool room.
    - Eliminate noise.
    - Use earplugs,
    - a fan or a white noise machine.
    - Turn off your phone.
2. Establish a routine before bed.
    - Meditate.
    - Listen to soft music.
    - Take a warm bath.
    - Read a book
3. Maintain a consistent sleeping schedule even on your days off. It will help your body adjust to working odd shifts.
4. Eat healthy foods.
    - Prepare foods at home to avoid late night fast food and unhealthy snacks.
    - Limit your caffeine intake in the hours before the end of your shift. You don’t want caffeine to interfere with your sleep.
5. Try to exercise regularly. It will help improve your mood and your sleep quality.
6. Make time to socialize and be with family and friends.
7. Talk to your doctor about any medications you take and any health issues you experience.

Final Word

Shiftwork can be challenging to both your physical and mental well-being. Taking care of yourself, your health and your relationships can help reduce the challenges and keep you and those around you safe and healthy.